A Web of Fantasies

Salzman-Mitchell, Patricia B.

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I began this study in search of the gender-specific meanings of images and gazes in the complex mosaic of pictures woven in text that is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. I found myself in the intersection between two critical movements: the mainly male-dominated Ovidian criticism and the mostly female-centered gaze theory. While the first has fallen short of recognizing the rich gender implications of looking in the poem, the latter, though enlightening, has likewise shown itself insufficient to account for the complexities that *Metamorphoses* has to offer.

Feminist film theory has proved useful for reading the Ovidian epic, for it has promoted productive readings of its episodes and has stimulated us to look at amply discussed episodes in an ‘oblique’ way. It has also encouraged us to ‘suspect’ both traditional views and feminist views of the poem. Yet our discussions have also shown the shortcomings of feminist gaze theory, for Mulvey’s model can only conceive of successful male viewers and cannot properly account for all the unsuccessful, feminized, and problematic males or for the gaze of women. Likewise, Kaplan’s idea that women’s gazes are completely passive and that females cannot ‘act upon’ their gazes, has been deconstructed, as female narrators prove to be witnesses who can give *indicia* of what and how their gazes see. This also offers an answer to the crucial question of whether the masculine position is the only possible position of power for women. By narrating their stories and transmitting their gazes to other women, they not only leave their imprint in the world of *Metamorphoses* and in Latin literature, but they also stimulate other women to forge cooperative and personal readings from a feminine perspective.
Using feminine film theory has also illuminated aspects of both male and female gazes which have much to do with narratological issues. The penetrative, active, and intrusive male gaze of both readers and characters can intrude on the ‘visual’ and textual representation of ‘landscaped’ women. Its fixing power is also capable of detaining images and actions and of fixing eroticized female figures. Yet to all this male power, we saw that females like Diana and Ceres can return the gaze and affect the male viewer with paralysis or transformation. Likewise, sometimes like Andromeda tied to a rock, the very image of detained females can paralyze and disturb the mobility and independence of the male viewer. We also saw how gender has meaningful implications for narratology, for the active and advancing Narrative may be seen as a masculine aspect of the text, while ‘static’ and ‘passive’ Description may be taken as female. Thus, as Blake once said, “Man is Time and Woman is Space.”

Do we know more about female gazes than we did before? I offered ideas of how and what some women see in the poem. Again, there is no definite formula because women’s gazes are varied and complex and fluctuate from conservatism, to sisterhood, to rebellion. Nonetheless, I hope to have revealed that there is a gaze behind every female textual and visual production and that the journey in search of those gazes is in itself worthwhile.

In the history of Ovidian criticism the mainstream concerns about *Metamorphoses* have had to do with narrative questions, structure, humor, aetiology, and Alexandrian tradition among other things. With few exceptions, male readers have created the bulk of this tradition. Yet this book, alongside other recent attempts by feminist readers, has shown that there is much room for alternative views, from alternative readers. Philip Hardie ends a recent piece by saying: “I hope to have shown how readily the *Metamorphoses* opens itself to a reader, such as Petrarch, possessed of a sense of alienation and strangeness, of not being at home.”

To conclude, I would like to echo Hardie’s words to describe my readings of *Metamorphoses*, for, as a woman and an exile, I am placed in a doubly oblique spot from where to cast sideways glances at the poem. I hope that I have challenged male and female readers and viewers to find their own slanted standpoints from where to create ever-changing readings of this ever-changing poem.

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ultima pars telae, tenui circumdata limbo,
nexilibus flores hederis habet intertextos.

The edges of the tapestry, surrounded by a slender border, have woven flowers intertwined with ivy. Met. 6.127–28